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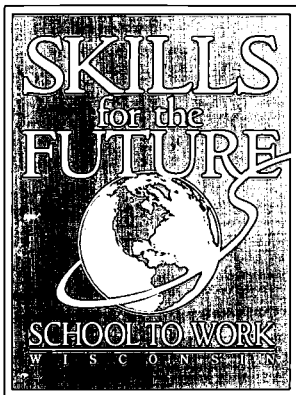
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ABSTRACT

School-supervised work experience is suggested as part of the Wisconsin school-to-work program. This booklet is designed to inform school administrators, coordinating teachers, other educators, and parents about essential ingredients of high quality work-based education. It covers the following: (1) an introduction to workplace learning; (2) a definition of work-based education; (3) benefits of workplace learning for students; (4) benefits of workplace learning for the community; (5) selecting a job for the workplace experience; (6) scheduling workplace experiences; (7) the roles of educators, parents, and co-workers in workplace learning; (8) recordkeeping; (9) connecting school to work and the classroom; and (10) work experience program options for various grade levels. (KC)

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The Workplace As A Learning Place

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School-to-Work Resources

The Workplace as a Learning Place

Preston E. Smeltzer
School-to-Work Team



Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
John T. Benson, State Superintendent
Madison, Wisconsin

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The Workplace as a Learning Place

“Workplaces are no more magical than schools; simply placing young people in them does not guarantee that they will learn.”

—Mary Agnes and Stephen F. Hamilton

An Introduction to Workplace Learning

During the last several years, business representatives and other education stakeholders examined how schools might better facilitate student transition from school to adult life. They concluded that greater student participation in the workplace can improve student preparation for the world of work. Business people and educators agree that the workplace offers students experiences they may not find in school—experiences that will lead them to become responsible, cooperative, and active members of society.

Work experiences expose students to different job types and helps students learn and apply skills necessary for today’s working world. Exposure to the workplace also gives students an opportunity to develop work behaviors that make them employable. Programs that use work experience methodology include cooperative education, youth apprenticeship, internship, Work Experience Career Exploration Program (WECEP), job shadowing, service learning, general work experience, and school-based enterprise.

A Definition of Work-Based Education

School supervised work experience is defined as “a set of planned educational experiences, supervised by licensed school personnel, designed to enable learners to acquire attitudes, skills, and knowledge for work and other life roles by participating in actual or simulated work settings related to in-school instructional programs.”

This booklet is designed to inform school administrators, coordinating teachers, other educators, and parents or guardians about essential ingredients of high quality work-based education.

Benefits of Workplace Learning for Students

Learning that occurs in the workplace is more likely to be applied than that in the traditional classroom. When students actively participate in the workplace, they have an opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills. At the same time, they see that when knowledge is applied outside of school, it is not artificially segmented into courses or disciplines. School-supervised workplace learning can benefit students in ways that are unavailable to them in many in-school settings.

- The workplace can increase opportunity for student self-management, initiative, and decision making. The structure of the workplace can nourish cooperation and a sense of responsibility to others.
- Planned workplace education experience will give students an opportunity to learn what type of work they find enjoyable and interesting, what they are good at, what they need to learn, and where they need to improve.
- The workplace offers students a chance for meaningful contact with older adults and encourages youth to adopt adult perspectives. Additionally, adults in the workplace can serve as a supportive network of individuals to whom students can turn for advice and help.
- In as much as work experience and work skills contribute to future youth employment, earlier initiation into the labor force can improve student chances of successful employment as young adults.
- As schools emphasize academic skills, the workplace can be relied upon more heavily to teach job skills and other practical everyday living skills.
- Students involved in paid work experience can gain an awareness of the true cost of independent living. Educators and parents should insist that a portion of the proceeds from paid work experience be saved for long-term needs. Students can also be encouraged to contribute a portion of their earnings to family expenses and charity.

Benefits of Workplace Learning for the Community

Workplace learning can also provide benefits to the greater community—including industry and civic life.

- Workplace education strengthens ties between business and the community. It is a way of combining the best educational benefits of both the academic system and the larger community in which students live.
- Students involved in workplace learning are less likely to drop out of school.

Selecting a Job for the Workplace Experience

The most productive workplace experiences take place when students do the same type of work as most adults. Unfortunately, adolescents are often put to work doing tasks an adult would not be interested in. Such work provides little opportunity for self-management, initiative, decision-making, or meaningful contact with older persons.

Educators need to ensure variety in the job environment. When students rotate jobs within a business, they have increased opportunity for self-exploration, mastery of new information and skills, and a familiarization with all types of work available in the organization. Variety develops an awareness of the multiple applications of occupational skills and of the interdependence of different jobs. By applying themselves to diverse tasks, learners become self-confident and less threatened by the challenges of a changing workplace. Students can be invited to an occasional planning or policy meeting so as to give them further knowledge of how the business is run.

Schools must recognize that the profit motive is a major force in the workplace and youth may be viewed as a source of cheap labor for low skill jobs. When youth select jobs without guidance from school staff or parents or guardians, they may choose on the basis of short-term economic gain or comfort. Schools, on the other hand, have a responsibility to evaluate worksites on the basis of their educational payoff. A job that students find on their own may provide the same kind of learning, but there is no guarantee.

Community service is another means by which students can gain workplace experience. Studies have shown that community service work can be more beneficial than paid, part-time employment. Similarly, simulated settings such as school-based enterprises provide a further opportunity for students to learn of the benefits of participating in work. Simulated settings have the advantage of providing a more controlled educational experience when such provisions are necessary.

Scheduling Workplace Experiences

Students should avoid working too many hours per week. A heavy workload not only interferes with extracurricular activities, study time, volunteer work, and time for reflection, but can lead to cynicism about the value of work itself.

Educators responsible for supervision must ensure that work does not hurt school-based learning. Students should be able to maintain satisfactory progress in school. Teachers should be sensitive to clues that students who work outside of school are selecting easy courses or performing poorly in school. Similarly, school personnel should establish a cap on the number of hours that students work. A good standard is to have students work no more than 15 hours per week. The cooperation of employers is necessary in order to implement such conditions and limits.

The Educator's Role in Workplace Learning

School-supervised work requires the involvement of caring adults who help students choose the right kind of work and schedule. If the workplace experience is to enhance student maturity, youth should work in the company of older persons who can be mentors or role models. Although nearly any work experience can be beneficial, the most productive experiences occur in settings that match a student's interests and that are supervised by adults who understand the needs of student workers. School-supervised work experience has the potential to help students develop greater self reliance, a more positive view of work, and a stronger sense of identity.

The educator provides a vital link between the school experience, the student, and the workplace by

- understanding how adolescents learn and how they relate to the world around them;
- assisting workplace mentors in dealing with students; and
- helping students understand links among what they learn in school, their interests and aptitudes, and their lifework goals.

The objectives of a workplace learning experience must be specifically stated, understood, and accepted by the student, teacher, and workplace mentor before the experience begins.

Primary responsibility for achieving educational outcomes lies with the school. Among their supervision responsibilities, school staff are required to

- develop learning sites, agreements, and plans;
- facilitate discussions among the student, employer and the parent or guardian;
- promote regular reflection on workplace experiences;
- visit students while they work in order to diagnose or assist in appraising student progress; and
- establish and implement formal evaluation procedures.

Supervision also includes professional staff involvement in planning the work experiences. Student-teacher ratios in a quality school-supervised work experience should be no higher than the school's average teacher-student ratio.

The Parent's Role in Workplace Learning

Parents are also essential partners in work-based learning. They may need to help their son or daughter get to work, purchase appropriate clothing for the job, and develop good work habits. In order to avoid confusion or misunderstanding, a formal agreement detailing everyone's duties and responsibilities should be discussed and signed by all parties involved in work experience.

The Co-Worker's Role in Workplace Learning

Co-workers who are called upon to interact with students involved in a work experience should receive a comprehensive orientation to their roles. Collaboration between these workers and the teacher-coordinator should be maintained on a systematic basis for the duration of the experience. As part of their responsibility for supervision, schools should assume full responsibility for the training and recognition of all personnel who implement work experiences. Personnel from the workplace make a critical contribution to the success of work-based learning. They need to be well informed about the program and its goals. Further, they should play an active role in shaping the learning experiences.

Record-keeping

Work experience is intended to make students more employable in their early adult years. Unfortunately, few youth employed during their school years keep records of their employment. Students should be encouraged and assisted in asking employers to verify and evaluate job performance. In order to include vital details, job evaluations or references should be completed while, or shortly after, a student is employed. Students who save these evaluations or references and other career-related materials will have a portfolio of valuable lifework-related information about themselves.

Connecting School to Work and the Classroom

School-to-work is an opportunity to improve the educational value of the work students are now performing. One way of ensuring that students gain from their workplace experiences is by relating this experience to the in-school instructional program.

Educators who use work experience must help learners prepare for the experiences, integrate experiential learning with other educational experiences, and process the experiences. One of the major aims of work experience is to make learning more meaningful. Simultaneous and follow-up opportunities for discussion and reflection are an important component of any school-supervised work experience.

Teachers can increase the educational value of students' work experiences by integrating such discussions into existing classes. Doing so helps guide and stimulate thinking of both the worker and the non-worker about the world of work and adds a valuable intellectual component to employment experiences.

Work Experience Program Options

A truly comprehensive workplace learning system includes community field experiences, occupational training, and paid work experience.

Field Experiences (grades K-12)

Short-term field experiences can facilitate student study, observation, and participation in a work environment. For example, students can travel to a worksite where they are asked to describe all the jobs. Or employees in different jobs can describe and demonstrate their tasks. Such experiences can be developed and offered at minimal cost.

Field experiences can take place at the individual level. Many students may already be routinely studying, observing, and participating in work without an opportunity to interpret and reflect upon these experiences. Through planning, design, and integration, school personnel can capitalize on these experiences.

Occupational Training (grades 7-12)

Students can be provided unpaid opportunities to learn about work and related life roles by studying, observing, and performing them in an environment (actual or simulated) where those roles occur. Employers providing this kind of student work experience derive no net benefit from students' efforts. Examples of unpaid occupational training include job shadowing, unpaid or volunteer work experience, and service learning.

Paid Work Experiences (grades 10-12)

In paid work experience, the employer derives an economic advantage from the student learner's work. Although students at this level are still learning, they are productive employees. Among the examples of programs designed to provide paid work experience are cooperative education and youth apprenticeship.

For more information about starting a work-based education program or for sample forms, contact the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction School-to-Work Team, at the address noted at the front of this publication.

Related Resources

Lifework Planning: Beyond Career Majors (1997)

Wisconsin School-to-Work Self-Assessment Checklist for School Districts (1997)

The Wisconsin Developmental Guidance Model (1997)



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